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ABSTRACT

The use of poetry as a valuable part of the psychotherapeutic experience has gained increasing acceptance and usage in recent years. Poetry provides a viable modality for releasing intense emotions and reducing anxieties and hostilities. Poetry therapy was used with an 18-year-old male who was experiencing sexual orientation disturbance to examine the effects of such therapy on the client. The subject composed a sequence of seven poems filled with emotionally charged metaphors, symbols, and images, each showing movement toward the resolution of the conflict. The results suggest that the sequence of poems may be interpreted to support the Jungian view that the self may emerge in a hierarchy from the child, to hero, to self. (Author/JAC)

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# Resolution of Sexual Identity Through Poetry Therapy

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The Citadel

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## A. INTRODUCTION

The use of poetry as a valuable part of the psychotherapeutic experience has gained increasing acceptance and usage in recent years (Gladding, 1979; Lerner, 1975). Poetry therapy is by no means a well-defined technique, and a number of contemporary versions are reported in the literature.

A rather extensive literature deals with using existing poems in poetry therapy (Crootof, 1969; Edgar and Hazley, 1969; Hitchings, 1969). Three basic approaches are typically employed: selecting poems close in feeling to the mood of the client (Leedy, 1969); letting the client choose his poems, providing a release vicariously through the words of another (Lessner, 1974); and choosing poems which reveal a specific problem, permitting the client to identify or analyse the situation (Hitchings, 1969). Lawler (1972) has described succinctly how poetry provides insights into the human condition and, with appropriate application, insights by the client into his own condition.

One of the most significant techniques of poetry therapy is to have the client write his own poemt (Heninger, 1978; Luber, 1978; Rothenbert, 1972). In essence, the poetry provides a viable modality for releasing intense emotions and reducing anxieties and hostilities.

There appear to be few cases reported using a sequential development of poems in the long-term treatment process (Edgar, 1978; Greenwald, 1969). It is the purpose of this case

study to present an example of how poetry composed by the client served as a useful adjunct in the treatment of a sexual orientation disturbance. A sequence of seven poems filled with metaphors, symbols, and images was composed, each showing movement toward the resolution of the conflict. The case is presented using the sequence of poems as the structural basis: "The Truth," "The Admission," "Why!" "Acceptance," "Untitled," "Secret," and "Love."

## B. METHOD

### 1. Subject

The client, an only child, was a caucasian male, 18 years-old, from an upper middle-class Protestant home. He was an English major at an all male college and ranked in the superior range of intelligence. Physically, he was of moderate height, slim, with features which caused him to be considered "cute." No detailed family history is given; it will be revealed through the client's interpretations and discussions of his poems.

The presenting problem was the client's subjective sense of failure with his inability to cope with his existing sexual attitudes. Though quite verbal generally, the client found it painful to verbalize about himself, the conflict, his family, or interpersonal relationships unless he

could weave the information into the interpretation of his poems.

## 2. Procedure

A general Rogerian approach was employed as the primary treatment modality. This appeared particularly appropriate since the problem was presented to the psychologist in two anonymous poems placed under the door of the counseling center. Eight days after the second poem was delivered, the author presented himself to the psychologist for and evaluation of the poems and suggested an on-going counseling interaction. Throughout the course of treatment, five additional poems were composed. The poems are presented in the sequence in which they were written and with the titles and interpretations given them by the client.

### THE TRUTH

Hypocrite, liar, slayer of the truth;
How you speak reveals what you seek.
Lost soul stabbed by the love you sought;
but could not give;
And now a perceived change,
A new resting place.
Uncertain, afraid, you fought to remain,
But uncontrollable want caused a dare,
A secret let out...new fears...a change.

In interpreting "The Truth," the client revealed that he entered college a virgin. Discussions of sex were not permitted in the home, except on those occasions when he was reminded by mother that premarital sex was sinful. He got along well with girls, and during adolescence had numerous girlfriends, but he was always perceived by them as a "big-brother" rather than as a "lover." It was typical of his mother to reject all females whom he liked. He had no difficulties with male friendships, though he was not sure whether they liked him or his ability to get them dates. He accepted the role of "big-brother" to girls and "date-getter" for boys, but he saw himself as a hypocrite, a liar. He hated these roles. The client wanted to be accepted as a heterosexual lover, but he could not break free from the "big-brother" image. He "fought to remain," but "uncontrollable want caused a dare, a secret let out." The "uncontrollable want" was a desire for some sexual outlet other than masturbation. "A secret let out" referred to his intense homosexual fantasies and his first overt homosexual experience, leading to "new fears....change." The use of "you" rather than "I" throughout the poem, appeared to be a general displacement.

THE ADMISSION

Oh, crazy, mad scene,
These actors are a scream.
Pull the curtain, cut the rot.
The play is filthy, far too extreme.

But wait! What can this mean?
Two young lovers so far apart,
Drawn together by an abnormal trait,
Only to be smothered by knowing fate.

This poem was written after his first experience at an exclusively homosexual party. He describes the party as a scene from a play. "The play is filthy, far too extreme." The behavior of the "actors" was unacceptable to him as was his own behavior. The middle of the poem reveals an attitude of questioning about homosexuality. The last 3 lines of the poem provided an opportunity for discussion of societal and personal views of deviance and the meaning of intimacy, discussions spanning three counseling sessions.

WHY!

Pray, hurry with that drink,
I feel that I must weep.
And now the evening long past,
I lie cold and fast.
The act hours finished,
But why wonder and contemplate?
Oh, hate, hate, you brought on this fate.
A curious whim to prove a point,
Ending in twisted satisfaction,
And the desire to have this unnatural mate.

The emergence of a need for emotional expression is revealed: "I feel that I must weep." The interpretation of the poem was accompanied by intense emotional release in the counseling setting. The conative component was making itself felt. "The evening long past" refers to the hours spent in counseling sessions and in personal contemplation.

The hate emphasized in the poem had many sources. Primary among these sources was a conflictual feeling toward mother and absence of feeling for father. Mother was perceived as over-protective and excessively demanding in terms of both social and academic accomplishments. She insisted upon neatness, gentlemanly behavior, and cooperation with household chores. Throughout elementary school, the client was often "teacher's pet" because of his good manners, his cute appearance, and his cooperativeness. He felt that mother disliked all his girlfriends and tended to be more accepting of his male companions than of him. Father was in the military, and though the family was together most of the time, there was rarely any meaningful contact between father and son. Though father was considered a successful military leader at work, he was seen as a "weakling" at home, catering to mother's demands. He felt that both his father and and he were "Mother's helpers." He described his relationship with his father as one of coolness and distance. He reported that his father was aware of the mother's excessive demands and expectations, but made no effort to alter the

situation. Rather the father elected to remain away from home as much as possible. Another source of hate was self-directed. He was angry because he had no control over the fears and anxieties being experienced. He hated being a "big-brother" to girls. He hated the physical gratification achieved in his homosexual experiences. The "curious whim" is the same as the "dare" in poem one which provoked the client to his first overt experience, which ended in "twisted satisfaction." Several sessions were involved exploring these issues.

ACCEPTANCE

Oh, dreaded fear,
You finally appeared,
And, yet, I wonder,
Could this be the death of me.
I no longer love as a normal man.

There is no longer questioning or denial. The final line of the stanza indicates straight-forward acceptance. However, the acceptance was at a cognitive level, a level of fact, not at a conative level.

UNTITLED

I hate,
You who sit so passively while the lights dim
And I perform on the sordid stage of life.

You sit expressionless
And I the actor play a command performance to a
single audience.
When it's over, you know all....or think you do.

I don't hate because you know all....or soon will.
I hate because you know the joy of natural love
From birth to present.
You possess that which I want dearly,
And will have....
Or die a coward's death.

This poem was directed to the psychologist in specific and to the "normal" society in general. It is an intense statement of what the client wants and will have. It is a statement of willingness to conform to societal expectations and demands. The client felt he was making an adult decision. He had previously admitted that he could "no longer love as a normal man," but several sessions and one poem later, he had mustered the will to effect change. The last line, "or die a coward's death." was not intended as a suicidal threat, but more as an heroic declaration.

The next poem revealed a change of tone, a regression from adult to child.

SECRET

I know a secret
That you know not.
And it's mine to keep,
And you know not!

Cajole and plead,
Cry and demand.
But I have the secret,
And the upper hand.

So get your own secret,
And sit in the shade.
Then I'll come along
And secrets we'll trade.

The client's attitude here appears to be that of a "trickster," but he was a bit more serious in interpretation. Throughout the counseling sessions, he had revealed much of himself. Now he was at that stage when he wanted to know something of this person with whom he was going to share the decision which he was making about his life.

The final poem is dramatic in its simplicity, even though it does not directly reveal the resolution of the presenting conflict. In terms of the client's interpretation, it was indeed a complete statement of resolution. In the title itself, "Love," there was the recognition of his

capacity to love and his acceptance of love as a valid emotional experience. A key word to the client was "Aware," the decision camouflaged in the subtle use of adjectives.

LOVE

There at opposites
Did two figures sit.
Eyes glowing...minds flowing,
Bodies rigid, tense...Aware.

C. Results and Discussion

In this case, the use of poetry proved to be a valuable adjunct in the therapeutic process. Poetry provided the major focus for discussing, exploring, and resolving major problematic areas. The client succeeded in developing essential skills, assertive in nature, which permitted him to break the "big-brother" image with girls. He resolved many of his conflictual and negative attitudes relating to the family. Feelings of guilt were minimized, and the client was relatively free of conflict. The criterion for success was based not on whether the client elected a homosexual or heterosexual preference, but on whether the client was able to interact with others in a comfortable way and in a way that did not hurt another individual.

This case has been presented, using the sequence of poems as the structual basis. There was no attempt to

interpret the poems using a single theoretical base. Only the client's interpretations were reported. It does appear, however, that this sequence of poems could be interpreted in such a manner as to support the view of Jung (1953) that the self may emerge in a hierarchy from the child, the first manifestation, to the hero, the immediate prototype of the self. Edgar (1978) observed that in poetry therapy many clients evolve through the same sequence -- child, hero, self -- and that growth can be observed in the projections of the poetry. He also suggests that the first projection may be the parapathy itself; the individual writes about his preoccupation. In the sequence of poems presented, the first two, "The Truth," and "The Admission," directly address the conflictual situation. "Why!" is a statement of questioning and the revelation of a regressive action based on a "curious whim," the child. The next two poems, "Acceptance," and "Untitled" move to the hero, with "Secret" revealing somewhat the trickster hero. "Love" is a statement of resolution, revealing the emergence of the accepted self.

This case gives supportive evidence that poetry can be used as a tool, a useful intervention in the structure and process of therapy.

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